

GETTING AHEAD: EXAMINING THE INTERGENERATIONAL BENEFITS OF  
PARTICIPATING IN A COLLEGE SERVICE-LEARNING PROGRAM

by

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## **Abstract**

This quasi-experimental study was designed to examine whether increased friendly exposure or contact with an older adult population would influence college students' (n = 18) attitudes toward aging and their career choices in gerontology. The Aging Health and Development Program (AHeAD) offered at a large southeastern university connects college students and older residents of a local assisted living facility. The students in this service-learning course are required to develop weekly enrichment and fun activities that will motivate the older residents. Students and older residents were paired together to maximize the opportunity for a more intimate bonding experience. The Perceptions of Aging and Elderly Inventory (PAEI) and the Elderly Patient Care Inventory (EPCI) were used to measure the effects of the program on student attitudes toward aging as well as their views on working with the older adult population.

Qualitative comments by the students provided a better understanding of the true value of an intergenerational service-learning component in addressing any age bias and prejudiced views of the elderly educational process. It was also found that this intergenerational program enhanced the quality of life for participating seniors. Based on observations and qualitative interviews, residents praised the program for the joyful interactions with younger people, for the opportunity of being exposed to youthful ideas, and feeling more connected with the outside world, especially for those who were socially isolated. Challenges associated with intergenerational service-learning programs and specific recommendations for improving the AHeAD program are included in this evaluation.

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## Introduction

The older adult population ages 65 and older numbered 49.2 million in 2016 representing 15% of the population (Administration on Aging, 2018). By 2040, the older population is projected to increase to about 82.3 million older persons, over twice their number in 2000. Due to increased longevity and the baby boomer cohort, this dramatic rise in the elderly population will eventually peak at over 98 million in 2060. As this burgeoning elderly population ages in place, the need to provide an increasing number of support services along a continuum of care is apparent. As people live longer, they will experience more frailty and need expanded services. For example, according to this recent profile of older adults, the percentage of older adults age 85 and over requiring assistance with personal care (22%) was over twice the percentage for adults ages 75–84 (9%) and more than six times the percentage for adults ages 65–74 (3%). Given the fact that the 85-and-over population is the fastest growing segment, it is projected that this age group will grow to roughly 20 million in 2050 and will place further demands on caregivers. There is an urgent need to attract younger professionals who might be willing to find value in working with this vulnerable geriatric population.

While in many other countries, older adults are still viewed in a more positive light, valued and celebrated, this has never been the accustomed practice in the United States (Gilbert & Ricketts, 2008). As our society has become more modern, it has become less integrated than it was in the past. In a highly technological society experiencing rapid social change, generations are frequently separated socially, recreationally, and intergenerational contact is minimal (Senior & Green, 2017). Young people rarely seek out elders for advice and often see them instead as a burden. For many,

aging is considered a time of inevitable decline often leading to dependence, dementia, depression, and isolation (Drury, Hutchison, & Abrams, 2016). This negative view of aging can often lead to an increased level of anxiety associated with growing old. Older adults, especially those with disabilities, make many younger people ill at ease because of the reminders associated with their own aging (Bousfield & Hutchison, 2010). As a means of handling such feelings of distress, social biases towards the aged have become commonplace (Allan & Johnson, 2009; Allan, Johnson, & Emerson, 2014). As a consequence, many individuals simply distance themselves from old people only to reinforce further misconceptions and prejudices (Augustin & Freshman, 2016).

When it comes to working with older people, many younger people place a low priority on this vulnerable population (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018; Butler & Baghi, 2008). Due to prior family experiences, social influences, and media outlets, individuals form a host of negative attitudes and stereotypical views towards older adults (Gilbert & Ricketts, 2008). Often associated with declining health and disabilities, these disapproving observations often lead to a variety of discriminatory measures (Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2012). Older adults are often seen as devalued and an undesirable group to work with even though aging is an ordinary phase of the progression of life (Butler & Baghi, 2008; Chase, 2011; Goncalves, 2009). A recent shortage in the healthcare workforce coupled with the lack of interest and preparedness to work with the geriatric population will have an acute effect on the workforce's capability for the delivery of services to a rapidly growing older population. As the numbers of elderly in nursing homes, assisted living facilities and other community-based environments



continue to increase, interventions that can reduce biases against this population is of utmost importance.

### **Contact Hypothesis**

The contact hypothesis has been frequently used to assess the role that intergroup contact plays in reducing prejudices toward stigmatized groups such as the elderly. When young people interact with the elderly, they are prone to classify the older adults as being a part of an outgroup based on chronological age. Although there can be an increased level of anxiety and discomfort during interaction across diverse groups, it has been proposed that contact results in the reduction of prejudice as familiarity increases along with greater empathy for the outgroup (Tausch & Hewstone, 2010). Research has identified several provisions under which connections with stigmatized groups are most likely to ensure a reduction in negative perceptions (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Across age groups, contact is considered more effective when there is assumed equal social status between the two groups, when the contact is more intimate and equally rewarding for both groups, and when the interaction has a sense of purpose (Seefeldt, 1989). Previous research has also revealed that when intergenerational partners are paired together as an equal dyad the result is more likely to be satisfying for both age groups, especially when the shared activities or cooperative interaction is positive in nature (Teater, 2018).

The literature also suggests that increased contact with older adults is an important factor for promoting a greater desire among students to work in the field of gerontology (Aday & Campbell, 1995; Blieszner & Artale, 2010; Kogan & Schoenfeld-Tacher, 2018). Both informal contact such as with relatives and formal contact provided

through volunteer or paid work have been linked to initial interest in enrolling in a gerontology course (Kimuna, Knox, & Zusman, 2005) or to choose an age-related internship placement (Waites & Lee, 2006). Research has also found that college students who frequently interact with competent older people at work were more likely to form more positive perceptions of older adults (Allan & Johnson, 2009). Other studies have highlighted that the quality of contact is most important in reducing ageist attitudes (Bousfield & Hutchison, 2010; Drury, Hutchison, & Abrams, 2016; Hutchison, Fox, Laas, Matharu, & Utzi, 2010). Likewise, repeated contact between younger people and frail elderly individuals or those with dementia may contribute to the development of more negative attitudes toward the elderly (Pinquart, Wenzel, & Sorensen, 2000).

### **Changing Student Misconceptions**

Intergenerational service learning has become a popular way to efficiently introduce aging course content along with opportunities for face-to-face exchanges with older adults. Service learning is defined as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 6). This instructional scheme enables students to experience contact with older adults in real-world situations resulting in the acquisition of practical knowledge while often developing a more positive vision of aging (Butler & Baghi, 2008; Krout, et al., 2010). In their book, *Where's the Learning in Service Learning*, Eyler & Giles (1999, p. 21) state that “in order to be effective service learning must incorporate curricula and projects that are sustainable and developed in partnership with the community.” The authors also indicate that placement quality is equally

important where students are challenged and have opportunities to take responsibility for essential and varied activities. Opportunities for reflection promoting application of theories, writing, and discussion are considered key to the learning process as participants are faced with diverse social issues.

Research among college students has shown that bringing older and younger generations together allows the two groups to learn from each other, develop a greater respect for each other, and enjoy the interactions they have together (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018; Butler & Baghi, 2008). Evaluation results from a variety of university service-learning programs including social work students (Whitekiller & Bang, 2018), gerontology and health science students (Butler & Gaghi, 2008; Krout, et al., 2010), psychology students (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018), and allied health students (Zulch, Saundeers, Peters, & Quinlivan 2016) have documented the effectiveness of such efforts in reducing negative ideas about aging and the older adult population. The majority of these studies have incorporated a quasi-experimental method using measures such as “attitudes toward aging,” “aging anxiety,” and “knowledge about aging” to assess attitudinal changes.

Other service-learning intergenerational programs have been designed to encourage students to give consideration for choosing a career working with the older adult population in critical need areas such as nursing or occupational therapy (Davies, Reitmaier, Smith, & Mangan-Danckwart 2013; Fusner & Staib, 2004; Horowitz, Wong, & Dechello, 2010). These studies have used qualitative approaches such as an analysis of student reflective journaling to explore the impact on views of aging and a specific impact on career selection. For example, in a service-learning program linking nursing

students with older adults at a senior center, Fusner & Staib (2004) found that the most valuable perception was gained from the students' reflective entries. They found that "thoughtful reflection" was a useful exercise in helping students come to their own conclusions about the aging process. The majority of students who spent two days at the center assessing the health of older center participants revealed through their journals that they held a more positive attitude toward working with older adults. Another service-learning course which connected students with seniors for 20 hours found similar results. Students commented that the experience continued to have an extended impact not only on their attitudes toward seniors and their personal development, but also inspired a career interest in elder care (Augustin & Freshman, 2016). Aday and Campbell (1995), who examined nursing students' attitudes of working with the elderly, found that students after participating in a geriatric clinic were much more open to working with older patients. In fact, the authors found that a significant number of students had changed their minds from wanting to work in pediatrics to the elderly.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to identify the benefits of the experiential learning course called the Aging Health and Development Program (AHeAD) which is offered through the Department of Human Sciences of a large university in the southeast. The program, started in 1999 to bring college students together with seniors, began at a local senior center and has evolved through a number of stages. It then transitioned to a nursing home and has been firmly established at an assisted living facility since 2009. While this creative course offering has been in existence for 20 years, this will be the first attempt to formally evaluate this program.

In documenting the overall benefits of the program for both students and seniors alike, I examined the following research questions: 1). Will students have a more positive view of aging and the elderly upon completion of the AHeAD program as measured by the Perceptions of Aging and Elderly Inventory? 2). To what extent will students change their attitudes for working with the older adult population as measured by the Elderly Patient Care Inventory? 3) After completing the class, will students be more likely to express an interest in choosing a career working with the older adult population? 4) After participating in the program, what views do the residents have toward college students? I was also interested in learning what the AHeAd program meant to the residents and why they continue to participate from year-to-year. Student and resident recommendations for program improvement were also an important component of the evaluation.

### **The AHeAD Program**

This experiential learning course offering gives students an understanding of the aging process as they work one on one with an older adult. This course allows students to plan activities for residents and share in meaningful interactions. The purpose of the program is to affect positively the sense of well-being, physical fitness, and health status of older individuals. It also allows students to learn about aging, old age, history, and the different cultures in the local community. The residents who participate in this program range from those who live in the independent living section to the Alzheimer's care unit of the facility. The goals of this class include:

- Apply gerontological and developmental theories and research by working with an older institutionalized or non-institutionalized adult to positively affect health and well-being.

- Identify factors of aging, old age, history and cultural differences present in the aging population.
- Serve as a catalyst to bring together older institutionalized and non-institutionalized adults, staff who work with seniors, university faculty and students, and private and public sectors of the community to work towards common goals.
- Facilitate the interaction of both seniors and college students from diverse backgrounds, ethnic and racial roots, and health to contribute to social harmony and well-being.
- Provide knowledge of health issues affecting seniors' well-being and physical fitness thereby enabling the seniors to gain greater control over their health and increase their sense of well-being.

### **Program Procedures**

During the initial class meeting, the students are required to go through an orientation led by the facility's activity director. The orientation goal is to acclimate the students to the facility and give them an idea of what to expect in the upcoming semester. A slide show is used to discuss the rules and guidelines as well as display pictures of activities and themes students developed from previous semesters. The program is structured where students are divided into groups of about four or five, and each week throughout the semester, a different group is responsible for the planning and coordinating special activities for the residents. Students not involved in leading the activities for that particular week are seated with the residents helping them with games and group projects. There is always a weekly theme and the students leading are required to develop appropriate stimulating activities, games, and food that will interest the residents for about an hour. The students and residents always meet in the large dining room and usually two students and two residents sit together at a table. Even though students only lead the activities once during the semester, this is no small task as the

students essentially are required to plan a party for up to 60 people depending on the number of students enrolled. Table 1 (see Appendix) provides a brief overview of the planned activities conducted during the fall 2018 semester.

## **Research Methods**

### **Description of Sample**

There were 18 female students who participated in the AHeAD program during the semester the evaluation occurred. Their ages ranged from 20-31 with an average age of 23. The majority of the students are black and all seniors majoring in Child Development Family Studies. While approximately 30 residents attended the weekly sessions, 14 residents agreed to participate in the evaluation. The ages of those interviewed ranged from 58-95 with the average age being 83. Twelve white women and two men comprised this portion of study. I attended each class to conduct in-depth interviews with these residents. The interviews were always conducted directly after the class activities. This was the preference for the residents since they were readily available and were able to recall the events which had just concluded that particular day. The interviews typically lasted from 30 minutes to an hour and took place in the resident's individual rooms to prevent distractions.

### **Measures**

The Perceptions of Aging and Elderly Inventory (PAEI) and Perceptions of Caring for the Elderly (PCEI) developed by Rich et al., (1983) were used to measure changes in students' attitudes. This scale has been found to be a highly reliable (Cronbach Alpha = .86) measure when used on other college samples (Aday, Wallace, Krabill, 2018). The PAEI instrument contains 20 items enabling students the opportunity

to express their perceptions of the social, physical, and behavioral factors associated with the aging process. Participants marked their agreement or disagreement with each statement on a Likert-type scale (e.g., "Old people are not very smart" "Old people are very intelligent" "Old people are sick all the time" "Old people have a happy life"). Each point on the scale was weighted (1-4), with four indicating the most positive attitude toward older adults. A summation score was used for statistical analysis purposes. Possible attitude scores could range from 20-80.

To measure student perceptions of working with older adults, I used a slightly modified version of the Elderly Patient Care Inventory (EPCI) (Aday & Campbell, 1995). This instrument contained 15-items with participants marking their agreement or disagreement with each statement on a Likert-type scale (e.g., "Work with older people is a very worthwhile occupation" "I think I would be good at working with older clients" and "Older people are more demanding to care for than other age groups." Each point on the scale was weighted (1-4), with four indicating the most interest in working with older adults. A summation score was used for statistical analysis purposes. Possible attitude scores could range from 15-60.

Included in the questionnaire were inquiries about basic demographic information including age, gender, and major along with questions about when a person is considered old, work interest with the aging population, and older adult contact and previous work history.

I developed several additional post-test questions to assess any particular changes in attitudes after having completed the semester-long program. For example, students were asked, "As a result of this experience do you feel more comfortable interacting with



older adults? “Do you now better understand the nature of the older adult’s problems? “Please explain whether you think you would be more likely or less likely to work with the older adult population in the future?” Students were also asked to describe their overall experience with the AHeAD program including what they likely gained from participating in the class. Two questions that focused on improvements to make the program’s activities a better experience for both students and older adults was also included.

I also developed a series of open-ended questions to determine what benefits residents received from attending the AHeAD program activities. I was interested in how this group of older residents viewed college students and to what extent these weekly exchanges might have on their lives. My questions included, “Can we begin by you telling me generally about your experience with the AHeAD program and why it was important you?” “Why do you continue to participate in this program?” “Has being a part of this program changed your outlook on college students compared to before taking part in the program?” “What do you enjoy most about your weekly intergenerational exchanges? “What impact has this program had, if any, on your mental and physical health?” “Do you prefer being matched with a student or do you enjoy the opportunity to intermingle with all students? “What recommendations would you suggest to improve the program?”

### **Analysis**

SPSS was used to analyze the data from the pre- and posttest research instrument. Quantitative data were analyzed incorporating both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to measure relationships between

attitudes toward aging and frequency and quality of contact with older adults. Tests of significance, including paired t-test were used to analyze mean differences in pre- and posttest for the PAEI and the EPCI. For the student qualitative assessment, I used a grounded approach transcribing each response verbatim and then analyzed comments using the constant comparative method (Carey, 2012). This method is useful for identifying, analyzing and reporting common patterns and themes found in a social context.

## **Results**

### **Student Benefits**

The pre-test survey found that while most students did not have any prior work experience with the older adult population, about two-thirds of this small sample had previously enrolled in at least one gerontology course. At the beginning of the class, half of those enrolled in the AHeAD course did express an interest in working in a professional setting with older adults after graduation. When asked about their historical experiences and the frequency with which they engaged with seniors, almost half reported they seldom (once or twice a month) interact with older adults. One-in-five interacted more frequently (once or twice a week) with the remaining students intermingling with seniors almost on a daily basis. I did find that the more frequent the interaction with older adults ( $r = .34$ ;  $p < .05$ ) the more likely students expressed an interest in working with this population. Although I failed to inquire about the nature of the prior student interaction with older adults (work, social, family), I did examine the students' perceptions of the quality of those interactions. Overall, students held a positive view of their interactions with seniors as everyone found their personal experiences to be

either very rewarding (56%) or somewhat rewarding (44%). The results from a series of Pearson Correlations indicated that the more rewarding the interaction the more likely students held a positive view of working with the elderly ( $r = .56$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and held an overall positive view of aging when using the PAEI measure ( $r = .43 < .05$ ).

The general attitudes toward aging (PAEI) was positively correlated ( $r = .69$ ;  $p < .01$ ) with the perceptions of working with older adults (EPCI). Mean scores for pre- and posttest scores are shown in Table 2. The results for both of these dependent variables revealed significant changes with students demonstrating a more positive view of aging in general ( $t = 3.32$ ;  $p < .004$ ) and working with the older population in particular ( $t = 3.13$ ;  $p < .006$ ). The findings here support the contact hypothesis which states that increased personal interaction with diverse groups such as the elderly can successfully challenge traditional stereotypical views, especially when those social interactions are of a positive nature.

**Table 2. Paired Sample Pre- Posttest T-tests**

Variables	Pretest		Posttest		<i>t</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
PAEI Scale	60.83	5.18	64.50	5.41	3.32**
EPCI Scale	41.33	4.41	44.83	4.96	3.13**

\*\* $p < .01$

By further exploring the impact of participating in the AHeAD Program, I asked “How has this experience changed your view about older adults?” As a whole, comments from students indicated that this experiential learning opportunity served as an important tool for examining their previous notions about the elderly. Numerous comments from

students provided at the conclusion of the structured activities illustrated how their understanding of aging has changed and in doing so contradicted the typical stereotypes that frequently surround the older adult population.

“I learned that old people are just like us – with likes and dislikes.”

“I learned that older adults are not “like children” as people make them out to be.”

“They are not as frail as they are said to be, and they love to have fun.”

“They have a past and need support in their later life.”

“Older people aren’t mean and stubborn but are loving and happy.”

“Older people aren’t as scary as I thought.”

It is obvious from these comments that after interacting with this group of older adults, this experience reduced some of previously held negative views of the elderly. After getting to know the residents on a more personal level, student fears tended to subside resulting in an overall enjoyable experience. They found that elderly still like to have fun and be goofy like younger generations. When looking past the vast age differences and physical aging, the recognition that the old and young are much alike was illustrated by a student’s comment: “They still have a lot of the same wants and desires that anyone else has.” Other similar student comments such as, “Old people are people too,” “They are still people and are still adults like us,” and “They have the desire to be heard and to tell their stories” serve as compelling examples of empathy and illustrate the genuine acceptance that this group of students expressed for their senior counterparts.

Other posttest qualitative results were also positive when it came to the students’ perceptions of the program and the likelihood of aspiring to a career in gerontology. This

class is a requirement for Child Development Family Studies majors and many of them go into the class thinking they want to work with children. However, sometimes after taking the class, they are more open to the idea of working with older adults. When students were asked, if they were “more” or “less” likely to want to work with elderly after completing the program, the majority (13) expressed that it would be more rewarding to work with older people than with other age groups. Only four students indicated they still had a preference for working for children. As one student explained, “Although I enjoyed working with the elderly, my passion is still working with young children.” Almost all (17 students) agreed that working with older people is a very worthwhile or prestigious occupation. At the beginning of the class, 17 students felt that working with older people with chronic conditions would be depressing. However, at the conclusion of the class that number had been reduced to only ten students.

In viewing the process of aging in a more positive light, perhaps we should be aware of the important role that the aged themselves play in providing younger generations with new insights into this process. How seniors present themselves during their weekly dialogue seemed to be a critical component in changing a negative mindset. In the words of one student, “I had a great time getting to know my resident. She was a ball at each activity.” Just the opportunity to get to know someone more intimately in an informal setting where laughing and having fun becomes the norm tends to go a long way in helping solidify an experience that brings understanding and compassion. For example, as one student commented, “I learned that they (seniors) are just as important as anyone else.” Another shared, “They want love and someone to talk to just like anyone else, so why not it be me.” It is evident that these positive intergeneration experiences provided

further evidence that such experiential opportunities can also influence career choices. As two other persons stressed, “I am more likely to work with them because I loved the experience and bond” and “This class taught me how fun and easy it is to work with this population.” These findings support prior research that has found similar intergenerational service-learning opportunities have led dispelling myths about growing old and strengthening career choices in gerontology (Blieszner & Artale, 2010; Kogan, Schoefeld-Tacher, 2018).

Students were also asked to share about their overall experience with the program. Overall, comments were very positive with the exception of one person who voiced concerns of being paired with a different person every week because her partner was inconsistent. As she stated, “Without a consistent partner, it is tough to get to know someone by only meeting once a week.” Other student comments were, as a whole, very constructive. The responses ranged from having more student and resident interactions to continuing to do the pairing method. Students responses showed that they liked being paired up with a particular resident, but they would like to make some changes in order for it to be more organized and a better experience for students. This included having a more structured way of pairing up students and residents so that it would not change from week to week. Students were asked, “What improvements would you make to the program activities that would make it a better experience for both students and the older adults?” A student responded to this by writing, “Encouraging students to be involved with the residents, keeping the partner method. I would make sure which resident comes more often so we don’t have to continue to switch.” This could be done by the instructor and activity directors working together to pay careful attention that they only partner

students with residents who consistently attend the program. The following responses from this question confirm this desire of students to have a more structured program: “[They should] make the students stay with the same resident” and “I would recommend having a partner that is consistent.”

Students tended to support the program goals which first and foremost provided the opportunity to get a firsthand glimpse of what it might be like to work with this particular age group. There tended to be a certain amount of comfort in knowing this unique service-learning class is being shared with other student peers forming a sense of student togetherness. As one student remarked, “The experience made me appreciate working with older people more. They participated and had a ball each activity. I enjoyed being a listening ear and actively conversating with my resident.” Other similar student comments provide additional positive illustrations on how the AHeAD program influenced their view of the older generation:

“I really enjoyed this class. It opened my eyes to how the aging process really works.”

“The class was very worthwhile, and I’m glad I got the experience.”

“It was enlightening. Older adults have so much to give in so many ways and we learned so much from everyone in such little time.”

Through this class, the students revealed in the posttest that they now feel more comfortable interacting with elderly. I could also see this in my observations that the students seemed to become more comfortable interacting with the residents as the semester progressed. As a result of this experience, several students talked about this and how it enabled them to feel more qualified for working with this population. As one

student wrote, “I am more likely to work with older adults now that I have become more confident in interacting with this age group.” At the conclusion of the program only four students felt they might feel anxious or fearful of their own aging when working around older people. The number holding these anxious or fearful views was double (8 students) that when the class began. One student even admitted she was feeling anxious at first but ended up loving the class. For example, “Overall, I had an amazing time. I was able to get out of my comfort zone and create friendships.” As a result of this experiential learning class, students tend to see older adults in a more positive light - less stubborn, less mean, more active, more fun to be around than they first thought. After completing the program, all students agreed that they liked visiting older people and all but one student (17) now see the elderly as having a happy life compared to only 11 when the class began. In conclusion, these results show that the program was successful in changing students’ attitudes toward older adults.

### **Older Adult Benefits**

Interviews with the residents residing at the assisted living facility shed light on their feelings toward college students and how this program provides a unique opportunity to remain engaged socially. I asked participants to begin by telling me generally about their experience with the AHeAD program and why it was important to them. A common theme that kept coming up was the fact that this weekly intergenerational exchange “gives us a variation in our activities and something to look forward to.” As a general rule most assisted living facilities may not have the necessary staff to offer a comprehensive set of activities, often resulting in a sense of boredom among the residents. In contrast, the weekly activities prepared by the students are always



different and have distinct themes, and with the exception of special holiday rituals, the residents never know what to expect. As one resident shared, “That’s one reason I like to go is to see what they are going to do next. My first thought is when I know they are coming is I wonder what they are going to do today. It’s always enjoyable.” Knowing that students will be coming on a regular basis during the semester gives the seniors something to look forward to. As one 89-year-old male resident responded:

I’ve been quite pleased with it [AHeAD] and the young ladies always keep us active. They are all very good about sharing their feelings with us. They always come up with a little program...and this gives us a variation in our activities. I say it’s entertaining to us especially because we don’t have a lot of activities except things like bingo.

Another woman in her mid-eighties indicated that she continues to participate in the program from semester-to-semester because as she states:

It’s always enjoyable and it kind of gets us out of the [routine] we have here in this facility...We have our meals and come back to our rooms and we watch television. Sometimes we have a guest but most of the time I am alone because my family doesn’t live here.

To assess the residents’ views of today’s student population, I asked the question, “Has being a part of this program changed your outlook on college students compared to before taking part in the program?” A surprising finding was that most of the residents already held a positive attitude toward young people, with most responding that they loved young people and had previously had positive interactions with them. However, one resident in particular mentioned that her participation in this program removed any

doubts that she might have held toward the younger generation. As this woman of 58 years observed:

I never did think they were bad or anything like that but I never did know. You know? But I know now. It was just a thought that I thought maybe that person wasn't good or that person did so and so. But I mean when you talk to them and they respect you, it makes you feel so different.

The students are like a breath of fresh air as they bring in modern ideas and can discuss with residents what they are learning in school. One resident mentioned what he received that was special from participating by simply stating, "I just learn something new I guess, see new faces, and [there is] always new energy in younger people. Oh yeah. You don't get enough of that these days." The residents have the opportunity to see how times are changing and discuss with students their own perspectives. As one older resident responded, "The students we have now work with us bringing different viewpoints on things and we have different viewpoints so we kind of mix them. You know, I think it turned out real well." Other seniors expressed that there is still much to learn about the ongoing lives of college students. As these two residents in their 80s mentioned:

I have been around college students but nothing involved like a program like this, but students are down to earth and I just enjoy being with students because they have young ideas. I'm 86 years old but in my mind I'm not.

I have learned about some things that are changing. You don't get too much from the students about the education and such you know but you do get [to hear] about

how student life is you know more so than the subject matter, I think. [But you do find out] how courteous and respectable they are.

The residents made it apparent that they enjoyed getting to know the students. Many of them are unable to drive and are normally isolated from other age groups. Sadly, many said their families do not visit often and some even admitted they associate students as serving in a fictive kin role treating them like grandchildren. Past research has shown that older adults often struggle with loneliness when transitioning to an assisted living facility or nursing home. As they often have to deal with the loss of a spouse and close friends, they are left to face painful emotions. Some of the older adults spoke of how their college friends filled this social void giving a renewed meaning to their everyday lives. One elderly woman shared her feelings about the importance of this program to her:

The young people are so kind and good. It just seems like we know [the students] and it just makes us feel so good for them to come over and I enjoy it and I think most of the people do. It's entertaining and it takes your mind off of everyday problems. I can't say [enough] about the young girls and young women that come over here and entertain us and make us feel good because I think that most of us have a lonely spot.

One resident even pointed to a photo she had framed in her room picturing her with two students. She admired it fondly and told me about the wonderful memories she shared with the students from a previous semester. She even shared that she still writes letters with one of the students and the other had come to visit her during Christmas time. Being around young people has the effect of making older adults feel good and is a likely reason many of the residents here have participated in this program for the past several years.

When asking one person why she continues to come back year-after-year, she stated, “Because I enjoy it and it makes me feel young.” Another resident said that the students revive her and that is why she liked to be around them. Another older male reinforced this youthful theme by sharing, “I think a lot of it is being with younger people. That sounds trite but if all you are seeing is people over 70 most of the time in your community, it’s refreshing [to see younger people]. This intergenerational exchange allows for older adults to learn about new ideas coming from a younger age group and can prevent them from being stuck in the past. The following excerpts illustrates the value the majority of the residents placed on the value of this program to them.

Well basically, I feel the pleasure of being able to communicate with other human beings other than older people. I don’t want to leave the impression that I have any objection to older people. But we are together *all the time* [emphasis added], and this gives us a chance to hear other view points from the world other than our own...My father told me once that no matter how old you are you can learn from anyone you listen to.

I think it broadens our horizons. We tend to get in a rut of whatever we like to do. You know some people want to play cards, others want to read. All sorts of things and then there are group activities. But you tend just to focus on those things but when you have a whole group of people coming in with all different interests from all different backgrounds, suddenly you are more in the real world.

These excerpts from the interviews point out that engaging with younger people is clearly very important to the residents. It gives the residents a chance to learn from students, and in turn, it gives the students a chance to learn from the residents. Without a

doubt, every resident I spoke with used the word ‘fun’ when describing the AHeAD program. I can attest to this based on my observations as well. It is important for older adults to experience excitement and enjoyment in order to have a good quality of life. Living in an assisted living facility comes with its own set of challenges like never knowing when sickness or death will strike a resident. It comes with the constant reminder that time is limited, and life is always uncertain. Assisted living facilities typically try to make the environment as homey as possible, but despite this, residents know it will never be like the home they came from. Because of these reasons, it is imperative to provide activities for residents that will simply make them happy. I feel the AHeAD program is doing just that. This program is doing an excellent job of making residents laugh, get excited, and feel young again. The students make them feel loved and encouraged by spending part of their Friday afternoon at this assisted living facility.

### **Program Structure Changes**

During previous semesters, prior to the evaluation, the program structure did not intentionally match up students and residents, but instead, the two groups simple intermingled together from week to week, though some students and residents developed closer relationships and would deliberately seek each other out. However, during the semester I conducted the evaluation, the program was in the process of transitioning to a more structured model where students and residents are paired up. They were doing this to try something new and see if it is was more enjoyable for students and residents. This method was introduced with the idea that the weekly intergenerational exchange would enable the chosen partners the opportunity to get to know each other on a more personal level. As a part of their course requirements, the students were given a list of questions to

ask their senior partner. This information was used, in part, for the purpose of writing a paper and contributing to discussions boards about their senior resident. In order to satisfy this requirement, students could stay over after the day's activities were completed or even come to the facility during the week. This provided the opportunity for more intimate bonding between the intergenerational pairs.

The opportunity to create new bonding friendships among this age group appeared to be particularly important in breaking down some of the stereotypical barriers and ageist views of the elderly and the aging process. Based on my observations and interviews, I found both students and residents enjoyed being paired up. For example, as two residents shared their sentiments on this paired arrangement:

Well I am just sorry I can't get acquainted with all of them. I liked being paired. Just like the two girls (points to picture of her with two students). I love that because they looked for me and we would sit together. Of course, all the girls are nice and seem kind and sweet. I just wish I could get acquainted with all of them even though I know it's impossible.

Being paired up, you get to know that person a lot, you know. Otherwise, it's just not quite as much but I was able to hear what Rachel is doing now and what she plans to do and where she plans to go when she graduates here. One-on-one is always the best way I think.

### **Recommendations**

By doing this evaluation research, I am now able to offer some recommendations that would benefit the AHeAD program. The program is currently set up where it feels like the residents are going to a party each Friday and has traditionally been more about

entertaining the residents than it is about stimulating their minds. Given the fact that many of the community residents have participated in the program regularly for several years, some voiced their opinions about what activities would also be fulfilling for them. Offering some activities that were more educational in nature was a common theme shared by several participants. For example, one resident mentioned “something educational...to make it feel like it is worth your time.” Another shared, “might somebody make a short talk about what you are trying to impress on us. I think we would be receptive to listen to somebody...not too long a talk.” One other resident talked about having specific activities that they could work on. Several residents mentioned that since the students were out in the world learning new things, they seem to want students to share some of that information in a structured fashion. As one woman explained, “Just something that would be interesting to know even if we can’t use [it], just to know it. Because I am sure there is a lot going on out there that we are out of touch with.”

These comments indicate that older adults still have an interest in learning new things and would favor incorporating a small educational component into the AHeAD program. This could be in the form of students teaching the residents new things or it could be through the students and residents working on a small project together. The roles could even be reversed where residents could work together and come up with something to teach the students. Research has shown that some older adults begin to believe the stereotypes about themselves which contribute to their lack of motivation. They begin to see themselves as less productive and believe that, as you get older, you lose certain talents and abilities (Hernandez and Gonzalez 2008). In order to combat these notions, it is crucial to give older adults the opportunity to give back in some way. Older

adults feel more confident and valuable when they are making contributions. If they were able to use the knowledge and various skills they have accumulated over the years to teach to students, it could potentially change the way the residents see themselves. Additionally, if the students and residents worked together to make a difference in the community somehow it would have mutual civic benefits for both groups. Such a project would be time bound and would require significant planning as well as blending the talents and skills of students and residents.

### **Developing Stronger Bonds**

In order for students and residents to develop stronger bonds, I would recommend having students complete a project where they are required to visit the residents' they are paired with for X number of hours outside of class time. Since some of the students were disappointed that they did not develop a close relationship with their partner, this would be a good way to give them more time together to develop a relationship. They would be able to become more comfortable around each other and give them a chance to get acquainted better. The interviews with the residents showed that they enjoy the activities the students put on, but what is most important to them is simply being around younger people and developing relationships. In order to meet this requirement, students could be asked to keep a log to track the number of hours they spend with a resident and have it signed off by staff members. In order for students to learn more about residents' lives, partners could work together to write a life history of the resident's life. This would have a dual purpose of fostering closeness between partners as well as making something for residents that will be of great value to them. Ultimately, in any relationship it takes time to get to know someone better and develop a meaningful relationship. The students



should not only see their partner on the Fridays the class meets if they are to develop this type of relationship.

### **Reflective Journals**

In addition to meeting their resident outside of class time, other intergenerational programs have used reflective journaling as a method for students to document their experiences. Previous studies have shown positive results when students are given the task of writing their reflections in journals and turning it in at the conclusion of the program (Davies et al. 2013; Wakefield and Ericson 2003). This qualitative type of information demonstrates what the students learned and gained by participating. It gives students the ability to look back and see how they have grown through the progression of the program. Davies et al. (2013) evaluated an intergenerational program required for undergraduate nursing students where they used reflective journals to write about their interactions with an older adult they were matched with. In this shared learning experience, students were given questions to ask the person they were matched with regarding various topics such as aging, health, managing illness, and coping with loss. The results showed that students came away from the program having more value for intergenerational relationships and were able to make connections to theoretical class material. If the AHeAD program were to incorporate this type of project, it could enhance the experience for students and residents by opening the door for involving older adults as partners in student learning.

### **Inclusion**

Another recommendation would be to have more activities that are accessible and accommodating to all the residents. There were activities that some of the residents could

not participate in. There would sometimes be activities on paper such as crosswords, word searches, or mad libs that were difficult or impossible for some residents to do because of vision impairments. This caused these residents to feel frustrated with themselves because they could not participate. As one resident noted when asked about the scrabble game, "Yeah, the only problem with it today and the others at the table [said] too is that you know our eyes are not as good. You really want to see the scrabble board in order to do it. I love scrabble though." Others has similar problems when making a birthday card was the key activity. More attention needs to be paid to see if activities can be created that will accommodate the majority of the residents. This could be as simple as increasing font size and coming up with more games that everyone can participate in. That is not to say that everyone will always be able to do everything, but more attention should be focused on making the residents feel competent and happy.

### **Gender Neutral Activities**

Another area where I saw room for improvement is introducing more gender-neutral activities. There were only about four men who consistently came to the program during the Fall 2018 semester. There are many more women who live at this assisted living facility than men, so this is partially why there is such an uneven ratio who attend the program. However, I think more men would be interested in attending the program if there were more activities that both men and women could enjoy. A lot of the activities are centered around arts and crafts. I noticed on some of the days when I sat with the men, they did not seem to have any interests in decorating the paper binoculars when there was a safari theme or the cup cake decorating when there was a birthday theme. I do realize that that all activities cannot be inclusive and there will never be an activity that

will be suited for everyone. However, I think more can be done in the future to be inclusive of residents and hopefully interest more men in the program. It would be ideal if more male students participated in this experiential learning class. This would provide more diversity and a more positive experience for the residents.

### **Challenges**

Establishing an intergenerational service-learning program requires a significant commitment from faculty and required a close collaboration with community organizations. In particular, this is a time intensive effort when developing new curricula offering detailed service-learning experience. This approach to learning requires ongoing student supervision and the necessary time for guiding student reflection based on their experiences and course objectives (Horowitz & Dechello, 2010). Certainly, any experiential program will have unique challenges to overcome. Naturally, there were some pairs who connected better than others as some residents present more of a pairing challenge due to their physical or mental limitations. The number of students may vary from semester-to-semester often leaving a mis-match in terms of numbers and there are occasional absences that effect positive outcomes. As it was the case this semester, there were less students than residents causing there to be many residents who did not have a partner. A solution to this in the future would be to pair two residents with one student. Even despite these things, it was clear that by the last day of class, bonds had been made.

One of the other major challenges that I witnessed throughout the entire semester was that of communication between groups because of acoustics. The program always took place in the dining room of the assisted living facility. With fifty or more people in one location, it was extremely difficult for residents to hear those sitting right beside

them. This often caused confusion and frustration for those trying to have a conversation or when students were giving directions on activities. In order to improve this issue, an idea would be to break off into small groups in different rooms so conversations could take place in a quieter environment. The final challenge is trying to keep the program fresh and new each year. For residents who have participated year after year, it could become monotonous to do the same types of things over and over. Even though students try to come up with new ideas and themes each semester, it is still the same overall concept of students putting on a party for residents. This is where other things could be incorporated throughout different semesters such as writing residents life histories, participating in a community service project, or having both intergenerational groups get together to have a forum to discuss current events.

### **Conclusions**

My study has several limitations. One of the biggest limitations was the small sample size with only 18 students enrolled which perhaps impacted the correlation outcomes. Another limitation was the lack of a control group which is ideal when using an experimental design. It is possible that students might have been swayed by other classroom content or outside experiences. The findings are restricted in determining the long-term benefits of this class. In other words, the question remains whether attitudinal changes and work preferences for the elderly will be long-lasting. One lesson learned was that during the post-test exit survey, it became obvious that individual interviews or focus groups would have provided in-depth responses to the open-ended questions. Since not all of the older residents were interviewed, it is impossible to say their comments are representative of everyone who attended the program.

Despite these methodological shortcomings, this study did provide important findings that should be beneficial to those responsible for the AHeAD program. Intergenerational programs are crucial to the future of society where the old will soon outnumber the young. Intergenerational programs have the power to break down stereotypes, promote generativity, and form relationships between the old and young. The Aging Health and Development Program (AHeAD) has shown to be a model example of a successful intergenerational service-learning program. Despite having a sample that was disabled (residents with dementia and other physical limitations), which in past studies has caused negative reactions (Pinquart, Wenzel, & Sorensen, 2000), the environment that was created with this diverse group of older and younger people did not create negative attitudes. An example of this was shown as one student was paired with a resident from the Alzheimer's care unit who was not able to communicate very well and had physical disabilities. Regardless of this, at the end of the semester, the student said she enjoyed being paired up with this resident and learned a lot of wisdom from her and found they had a lot in common. You could tell it meant so much to that particular resident. Older adults also benefitted by being given the chance to engage with young people in their community which promotes successful aging. This research aligns with what other studies have concluded by supporting the contact hypothesis indicating positive interactions will reduce prejudices and encourage empathy between groups (Andreoletti & Howard 2018, Hernandez & Gonzales 2008, Krout et. al 2010).

Programs like AHeAD bridge the generational gap which provides benefits to both the young and old. This study shows how one small program can make a lasting difference in the lives of those who participate. The Department of Human Science is to

be commended for the commitment they have made to this course for the past 20 years. Overall, the program is doing a wonderful job of providing a program that many residents and students truly enjoy. This is certainly uplifting to hear and shows this program is meeting its goals as both residents and students look forward to those Friday afternoons when they join forces to share a small portion of their lives together.

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## **Appendices**

## **Appendix A– Table 1.**

**Table 1. AHeAD Service-Learning Activities**

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**Session One: Meet n’ Greet with Residents**

When the students and residents met for the first time, they engaged in a ‘speed dating’ type of activity. This fast-paced activity allows students and senior residents to meet each other and to make connections with a potential partner. The students provide a short list of names of those residents with whom they clicked with the most. The class instructor with activity director use student feedback as they created student-senior pairs.

**Session Two: ‘Isn’t Life Sweet’**

The students were provided questions to use as ice breakers which helped to get better acquainted with the residents. The activity and theme for this class was planned by the activities staff at the facility to give students some idea of what might be expected when planning their on stimulating program. The meeting room was decorated with bright colors and decorative candies were hanging on the wall and throughout the room with each table having a bowl of M&M’s.

**Session Three: ‘Party Like it’s Your Birthday’**

With festive streamers, balloons, and birthday hats, October birthdays were celebrated. A stimulating scrabble board game was shared by the students and seniors where only words related to birthdays could be used. Students also helped residents create birthday cards from construction paper, markers, and stickers.

**Session Four: ‘Welcome to the Jungle’**

During this session, everyone was dressed in animal print or safari gear. Residents and students were given riddles to solve together that were all about animals. The groups also played a game where residents tossed a fake banana in a cardboard monkey’s mouth. Lastly, they played charade’s and residents and students had to draw out of a hat to see which animal they would have to act out.

**Session Five: ‘Fall Festival’**

Students used a mix of fall and Halloween décor to get the residents excited about this time of year. They did paper pumpkin crafts, had to guess how many pieces of candy corn were in a jar, and a spin-off of a cake walk. Instead of residents having to get out of their seats to walk around, they stayed seated and passed around snack cakes which they were able to claim whenever the music stopped.

**Session Six: Let’s Get Physical’**

This session was all about getting physical and being active. One student led a Zumba workout with the residents that was simple enough for everyone. With up-beat music, everyone was laughing, clapping, and trying to follow along with her. There were light weights on the tables that could be used in the workout. Fitness bingo was played, and each table made a healthy snack of fruit parfaits.

**Session Seven: ‘Shake, Rattle, and Roll’**

Using a 50s theme, rock n roll banners were displayed with old glass coke bottles on the tables. Karaoke was the first activity with old 50’s songs. A ring toss at each table provided a fun competition. Trivia was played using famous people of the time to challenge the residents’ memory. Ice cream floats were served and everyone was given time to reflect on the semester and to say their goodbyes

## Appendix B – Institutional Review Board Approval

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### IRB

#### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Office of Research Compliance,  
010A Sam Ingram Building,  
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd  
Murfreesboro, TN 37129



IRBN001 - EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL  
NOTICE

Monday, May 14, 2018

Principal Investigator      Hanna Counts (Student)  
Faculty Advisor                Jackie Eller  
Co-Investigators                None  
Investigator Email(s)        hkc2k@mtmail.mtsu.edu; jackie.eller@mtsu.edu  
Department                      Sociology

Protocol Title                    Aging Health and Development Program Evaluation  
Protocol ID                        **18-2198**

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the **EXPEDITED** mechanism under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110 within the category (7) *Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated as shown below:

IRB Action	APPROVED for one year
Date of expiration	<b>3/31/2019</b>
Participant Size	5 [Five]
Participant Pool	Elderly Residents of Stones River Manor
Exceptions	NONE
Restrictions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Informed consent must be obtained</b></li> <li>2. <b>Identifying information must be destroyed upon data processing.</b></li> <li>3. <b>Participants must be over the age of 18.</b></li> </ol>

Comments	NONE
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This protocol can be continued for up to THREE years (**3/31/2021**) by obtaining a continuation approval prior to **3/31/2019**. Refer to the following schedule to plan your annual project reports and be aware that you may not receive a separate reminder to complete your continuing reviews. Failure in obtaining an approval for continuation will automatically result in cancellation of this protocol. Moreover, the completion of this study **MUST** be notified to the Office of Compliance by filing a final report in order to close-out the protocol.

#### Continuing Review Schedule:

Reporting Period	Requisition Deadline	IRB Comments
First year report	3/31/2019	TO BE COMPLETED
Second year report	3/31/2020	TO BE COMPLETED
Final report	3/31/2021	TO BE COMPLETED

IRBN001 Version 1.3  
Office of Compliance

Revision Date 03.06.2016 Institutional Review Board  
Middle Tennessee State University

#### Post-approval Protocol Amendments:

Date	Amendment(s)	IRB Comments
05/14/2018	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The participant sample size increased to 30 (THIRTY). Subcategory - 18 and older students enrolled in Agine Health and Development.</li> <li>2. Use of pre-test and post-test in addition to the interview has been approved.</li> <li>3. The scope of the study has been expanded from a class project to a thesis project.</li> </ol>	IRB Review

The investigator(s) indicated in this notification should read and abide by all of the post-approval conditions imposed with this approval. [Refer to the post-approval guidelines posted in the MTSU IRB's website](#). Any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918 within 48 hours of the incident. Amendments to this protocol must be approved by the IRB. Inclusion of new researchers must also be approved by the Office of Compliance before they begin to work on the project.

All of the research-related records, which include signed consent forms, investigator information and other documents related to the study, must be retained by the PI or the faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) at the secure location mentioned in the protocol application. The data storage must be maintained for at least three (3) years after study completion. Subsequently, the researcher may destroy the data in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity. IRB reserves the right to modify, change or cancel the terms of this letter without prior notice. Be advised that IRB also reserves the right to inspect or audit your records if needed.

Sincerely, Institutional Review Board